

The Hungry Ghost Festival

Food Offerings to Pacify the Spirits

By Rachel Khanna



Various food offerings, photo by Ingeborg Hartgerink-Grandia

The Hungry Ghost Festival takes place on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month and is intended to pacify the ghosts of strangers or other discontented souls. Once a year, these hungry spirits are allowed to roam the earth and mingle with humans. To keep the peace, people try to appease these ghosts with food, entertainment and money, aiming to ease their suffering while they wander the earth.

The legend of the Hungry Ghosts goes back to Mahamaud-galyayana, one of the Buddha's favourite disciples. Mahamaud-galyayana's mother had done bad deeds during her life and had been reborn as a hungry ghost. Mahamaud-galyayana offered rice to his dead mother, but hungry ghosts would consume it before she could eat it. In distress, he appealed to Buddha for help. Buddha told Mahamaud-galyayana that on the 15th day of the 7th month, the *sangha* (community) should fill clean basins with fruit and other food, along with offerings such as incense and candles. He instructed the community to place the basins in front of an altar and recite mantras and vows. Buddha then decreed that once a year, the gates of hell be opened so that the lost souls would be able to roam the earth and be fed.

Zhu Yanzhang, who founded the Ming Dynasty in 1368 under the name Hong Wu, enforced this tradition. He was obsessed by the fact that he became an orphan at the age of 17 and, not having enough money to bury his parents, he could not pay tribute to them according to the Confucian canon of filial piety. A former Buddhist monk, he found the tradition of the Hungry Ghosts particularly appealing, so he ordered all of China to adopt and celebrate it three times a year.

Therefore, on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month, a community celebration for the hungry ghosts takes place. Priests perform rituals on outdoor altars and offer incense, paper clothes and money to the ghosts. At the end of the ceremony, the priests toss them buns and sweets. Typical offerings are raw and cooked rice, raw noodles, unpeeled fruit and uncut meats. Another typical food is steamed fortune buns, *mee koo*.

All these foods have special symbolism. Noodles are a symbol of longevity and rice symbolises the link between heaven and earth. In Chinese tradition, many words have double meanings, for example in Hokkien, *mee koo* means 'bread tortoise' because the buns resemble a tortoise, a symbol of longevity. In addition, the word for orange means gold and the word for pineapple means wealth.

There are similar festivals in other parts of the world, such as *El Dia de los Muertos* (The Day of the Dead) in Mexico, the *O-Bon* Festival in Japan, the *Vu Lan* Festival in Vietnam and *Halloween* in the United States. These festivals all symbolise the placation of members of the underworld. A commonality among them is that they used to be associated with the agricultural harvest, when food was plentiful. Another similarity is that a common food eaten during these festivals is bread buns.

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Makeshift altar holding a plethora of offerings, photo by Gisella Harrold